Homily for January 27 & 28, 2001
4th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle C

By Father Charles Bowes

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19
1 Corinthians 12:31-13:4-13
Luke 4:21-30

Real love is painful yet satisfies.

A poet called love "a many-splendored thing." Even so, many, if not most of us, have a surprisingly limited way of thinking about it. We assume that love is feeling – emotion, titillation, pleasure and all that – but very much feeling.

At least that is how we've been conditioned in a thousand ways to interpret love. For instance, it has become common practice to lament the way love has become equated with sex. We try to point out that sexual expression is one way, a God-given way to express love. But we hold out, a little desperately perhaps, the view that love is more than sex. Nonetheless, it is logical to reduce love to sexual expression if for centuries we have been influenced by cultures which stress love as primarily a feeling – we see this all the time in motion pictures and television, the tabloids, contemporary music. And these are not just recent phenomena – from the romance of the Middle Ages through of the hijinks of the Renaissance and the sentimentality of the nineteenth century, to the clinical approach to love of our times, the fundamental notion of love has been that love as feeling – love as passion, when properly handled by law and custom, would allow us to love happily ever after – somehow captured in the throes of an unimaginable bliss.

We have even applied this romantic emotional idea of love to our understanding of how God loves us. If we don't, we are told, *feel* God's presence in us, then our love is insufficient. Surely, they say, if we love God enough, he will overwhelm our emotions, assuring us that we are on the right track by making us feel good. Even in our relationship with God, unless the lights flash and the music swells, and we want to be there in prayer or at Mass, it seems we can't be sure of our love or God's.

Then along comes St. Paul in this spectacular hymn in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapters 12 and 13, which proclaims love as something all together different than feeling. It is not excluded – but it is certainly more than that. St. Paul's words have to be shouted to make themselves heard above the sentimental nonsense. You've heard the word. In St. Paul's mind, it isn't the lights and the music, the bells and the whistles, the art and poetry, or the grandiose gesture that counts. What matters is the perseverance and the practicality. To be always patient and kind, especially when we're frustrated and grumpy – there's the test. To love those whom our feelings urge us to treat as enemies; not to rejoice in others' evils

because we think they deserve them: that's where we easily stumble. Love lasts, not because we enter some sort of romantic Elysian Fields, but because we determine, make up our minds and steady our wills, that we *will* love. It is practical because only in the day-to-day situations where we are tempted to impatience and unkindness, to jealousy and conceit, to lewdness and selfishness, can we strengthen our love. Simply vowing to keep undying faithfulness won't cut it without the hard-headed and steely-willed determination to live out what we say we believe. We create, on a daily basis, the loving world we wish to live in. In this we share in God's creative power. And it is a world filled with tired bodies and drudge-like tasks, with impossible bosses and cross children, with too little time before we weaken and die. This is the world of practical loving. And practical loving reveals our God, fulfills our hope – for hope is nothing more than love projected into the future.

"Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams," say Father Zosima in Leo Tolstoy's *Brothers Karamozov.*

Look at the image of the crucified in the front of our church – that's love made real. It shows itself so often in the faces and hearts and hands of those at the Alzheimer's center as I visit those near death. Granted, married love is but one expression of real love, but it reflects what it's all about. One woman and her husband recently proclaimed this vividly. She was badly stooped from arthritis. Yet every day she made the twelve-mile trip to feed her husband his midday meal.

Everyday she would go through the same routine. "Who's this?" she would ask, lifting a framed photograph of their daughter from his dresser. He would stare at it, then shake his head. It was the same with the pictures of their son, their grandchildren, their old collie. She would then lift his hands from the arms of his chair, hold them in both of hers and ask, "Who am I, dear?"

At first, he would look confused. Then his face would brighten and he would look like the man she fell in love with. "You love me," he would say. Most days they would be the only words he would speak. But they were enough.

Let us pray...God of love, I long to bear, believe, hope, and endure all things. Draw me and my brothers and sisters into the love of your Son Jesus in whose name we pray now, and forever.

Real love is painful yet satisfies.